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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: DEMOCRACY IN ACTION AT EDITOR'S CLUB

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (U) SUMMARY: On January 21, the Ambassador attended a meeting of the Astana Editors-in-Chief Club. Though this organization has been in existence for some time, it has recently risen in profile through increased government ties and impressive leadership. The government-approved Editors' Club combines both opposition and pro-government journalists. The Ambassador was the first foreign diplomat ever invited to attend one of its sessions. Drawing on his background in journalism and public affairs, he spurred a lively, two-and-a-half-hour discussion about the media situation in Kazakhstan, and answered - and corrected - many misperceptions about U.S. policy. The Club freely discussed the recent amendments to the media law that were proposed pursuant to Kazakhstan's Madrid commitments, as well as the libel law and other media topics. After the session, the Club leadership asked the Ambassador to provide an American journalist to teach master classes. This Club is a government-approved public association, and, as such, is emblematic of the interesting proto-democracy the government of Kazakhstan has the self-confidence to encourage. END SUMMARY.

13. (U) The Astana Editors-In-Chief club has 56 members, led by former owner and general director of the Astana television channel "ERA," Mirbulat Kunbayev. Kunbayev is well-respected in media circles, being seen as an honest facilitator among pro-government, independent, and opposition voices. His leadership of the club has coincided with its rise to prominence, an ascension marked by a visit late last year by Minister of Culture and Information, Mukhtar Kul-Mukhamed, who called the club "a reliable partner of the Ministry." The Club worked with the government to draft the media amendments proposed to address the commitments made by Kazakhstan at the 2007 OSCE ministerial in Madrid where it was awarded the 2010 chairmanship of the organization. Kunbayev firmly defended the Media Law amendments but also acknowledged they do not meet highest expectations. He suggested they should be seen as steps forward in a continuing process.

CLUB ENCOURAGES SPIRITED DEBATE

14. (U) Despite his association with the government, Kunbayev has not excluded independent and opposition voices from the Club's membership. This became clear from the first exchange of the afternoon, just after the Ambassador delivered his opening remarks.

The first questioner, from centrist "Channel 31 Television," disagreed with Kunbayev about the Media Law amendments, saying they address only the most "stupid" restrictions and don't positively affect the way journalists do their jobs. Later, a reporter from oppositionist "Svoboda Slova," dismissed the amendments as "cosmetic, not substantive," and asserted they are simply a way to ease Kazakhstan into the OSCE chair. (COMMENT: That Kunbayev promotes open debate is a credit both to his leadership and to the government's commitment to multiple voices in public debate. END COMMENT.)

JOURNALISTIC RESPONSIBILITY

15. (U) The afternoon's major debate focused spiritedly on the media amendments, journalistic responsibility, and libel. Some maintained the amendments absolve journalistic defendants from the burden of proof in libel cases, which they had previously borne, and make plaintiffs and defendants equal in the eyes of the law. However, in Kazakhstan truth still does not serve as a defense in defamation cases, and this law has been used often to close newspapers and punish inquisitive journalists, some of the most out-spoken journalists maintained. Kunbayev questioned whether journalistic errors should not be punished by law, since "the first and foremost duty of reportorial responsibility is to bring truthful information to readers. Otherwise reporters will feel free to provide any false and fabricated information using this protection in the law, and that will not provide a good service to our society." The Ambassador disagreed and explained the U.S. standards of press freedom, journalistic responsibility, and libel and how they have historically evolved. (COMMENT: The subsequent RFE/RL report of this exchange lost all nuance and portrayed the Ambassador as a black-and-white critic of the government on this issue. END

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COMMENT.)

16. (U) The Ambassador posed the question, "How do you as journalists prevent wrong information, or how do you prevent negative propaganda?" He gave as an example the recent false reports in the Kazakhstani press that American soldiers had been spotted at the Almaty Airport taking measurements for a future military base. This sparked a debate with the representative from pro-government "Megapolis," who underlined a more typical Kazakhstani approach to journalistic responsibility. She insisted that "each media outlet has its own opinion and the right to express it," completely missing the Ambassador's distinction between opinion pieces and straight news. The Ambassador responded that professional journalists have the responsibility to base their opinions on objective reality, not fantasy suppositions or, even worse, black propaganda that might be fed to them. The journalist riposted the Embassy has the responsibility to contact the editorial board of an offending press report to set the record straight. The Ambassador responded, "That's an excellent suggestion - thank you!"

OFF-THE-WALL PUBLIC OPINION

17. (U) It would not be an encounter with Kazakhstani journalists without a bizarre question or two. One reporter insisted that Kazakhstanis are more European than the other peoples of the region, in part because "our women marry Europeans," and asked for the Ambassador's opinion. The editor of "Capital Morning" insisted that President Obama had promised to provoke "war and crisis" in the next few years, and stated that because the United States was currently engaged in military conflicts and Kazakhstan was not, democracies are more likely to cause wars. (NOTE: However, after her aggressive questioning, the editor asked the Embassy's public affairs staff for closer cooperation on her paper's nascent English-language page. END NOTE.) Another journalist asserted that the world economic crisis was the result of the U.S. dollar not being backed by gold and asked if the Ambassador agreed that a new "world currency" would emerge after the crisis.

18. (SBU) A self-declared "opposition journalist" charged that the United States has stopped paying attention to democracy in Kazakhstan during the past few years and is "cozying up to the regime" because of Kazakhstan's oil. He asked the Ambassador why

the United States doesn't "break relations with Kazakhstan to teach it a lesson and force it to become a democracy." (COMMENT: We have heard this simplistic analysis from leaders of some of the so-called opposition parties. We say "so-called," because these parties have no substantial influence in Kazakhstan's political debate. Rather than build real grass-roots constituencies, they tend to think that "Uncle Sam's approval and support" will lift them to power. END COMMENT.)

CLUB REQUESTS MASTER CLASSES BY A U.S. JOURNALIST

¶9. (U) The Club leadership was clearly delighted to have the Ambassador as a guest, emphasizing that he was the first foreign diplomat ever to have appeared at a Club meeting. The event was covered extensively by the Kazakhstani mass media, including all the major television stations. Kunbayev is also seeking closer cooperation between the Editors-in-Chief Club and the Embassy. He suggested that the Embassy bring an American reporter to Astana to teach master classes for his Kazakhstani colleagues. Ambassador Hoagland heartily endorsed the idea and committed to find a way to make this happen.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: Some stereotype the Kazakhstani media as either supine, government-controlled toadies (television and the majority of newspapers) or irresponsible, bomb-throwing oppositionists (a minority of Almaty-based publications). However, the Astana Editors-in-Chief Club represents serious journalists interested in improving their level of professionalism, even while they debate what that entails. This meeting opened a door for the Embassy to a corps of influential journalists who are likely to shape the future of the media in Kazakhstan, especially Mirbulat Kunbayev, whose rising profile and balanced facility with the whole spectrum of Kazakhstani journalists marks him as someone to watch on the media

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scene.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: Some critics in the West tend to dismiss Kazakhstan's government-approved "public associations" like the Editors-in-Chief Club, primarily because of their government imprimatur and, perhaps, because we do not perceive them as Western-style, wholly independent NGOs. In our experience, Kazakhstan's public associations are indeed a valuable element of democratic institution-building, because those like the Editors-in-Chief Club are inclusive of a broad range of opinion, including opposition voices. We suggest our goals -- and ideals -- would be better served to recognize the valuable contribution to democracy-building these public associations are making in a very complicated and conflicted part of the world where Russia's views tend to dominate news and information. A good number of Kazakhstanis want to work with us, but within their own system. We should both respect and carefully, wisely take advantage of that. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND